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ABSTRACT

Political and economic upheavals in the 1990s have left their mark on adult education. A major source of change is globalization of the capitalist economy and its restructuring, which make extraordinary demands on education, particularly adult education. Lifelong learning has become an ideological distraction shifting the burden of increasing adaptability to the worker and a ray of hope for a more democratic, engaged citizenry. A Marxist-feminist framework explains complex social relations that underpin the lifelong learning debate. Marxist feminism views feminism as a conscious intervention in the hierarchically organized regime of gender power. Instead of achieving prosperity for individual workers, reorganization of adult education is concurrent with emergence of a newly segmented working class. Talking about lifelong learning for a unified workforce is actually talking about a highly stratified group. By differentiating skills along lines of race and gender, workers with a wealth of skills, knowledge, and experience are devalued; the commodity value of white male labor continues to rise. An ever cheaper, ever more adaptable workforce is the only way to ensure continued growth of profit in a global capitalist system. As a citizen-centered project of social change, lifelong learning must invigorate its ties with social movements, without which it fails to achieve its full potential. (Contains 13 references.) (YLB)

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The Struggle Over Lifelong Learning: A Marxist-Feminist Analysis

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Abstract: The concept of lifelong learning has become both an ideological distraction that shifts the burden of increasing adaptability to the worker, and a ray of hope for a more democratic and engaged citizenry. The purpose of this paper is to provide a Marxist-feminist analysis of the responses of the field of adult education to the concept of lifelong learning.

Introduction: Lifelong Learning as Contested Terrain

The political and economic upheavals of the 1990s have left their mark on the field of adult education. A major source of change is the globalization of the capitalist economy and its restructuring, which make extraordinary demands on education in general and adult education in particular. The changing economy calls for the reorganization of adult education into a training/learning enterprise fully responsive to the requirements of the market.

Within this political economic context, lifelong learning has been deployed in two ways: first, it is a central concept in the hegemonic assertion that lack of skill causes unemployment; and second, constant retraining prepares workers to be ultimately adaptable, and always ready to acquire new skills as the needs of capital dictate. Coupled with privatization and structural adjustment, the burden of training workers in new technology has shifted from work-place training and state initiatives to continuing education courses paid for by the worker. Elain Butler argues the discursive of lifelong learning is '... designed to simultaneously seduce and command compliant disembodied citizen-learner-workers to willingly accept responsibility for the ongoing development of their personal exploitable capacities' (Butler, 2000). The concept of lifelong learning has become both an ideological distraction that shifts the burden of increasing adaptability to the worker, and a ray of hope for a more democratic and engaged citizenry.

In this paper we ask: why 'lifelong learning' is being enthusiastically endorsed by adult educators, policy makers, business community, and others? Should we cautiously welcome it or resist it? Is 'lifelong learning', as Ian Baptiste would label it, 'a most excellent decoy' (Baptiste, 1999)? We argue that in the last decade the international adult education declarations were drafted in the context of lifelong learning ideology. These documents generally promote a democratic or 'ambitious' vision by tying learning and learners to citizenship, participation, justice, gender equality, peace, economic development, civil society, indigenous peoples and minorities. There are, however, serious constraints on making these links.

Using Marxist-Feminist analysis, we argue that in complex social relations of power, education/learning is only one dimension of prosperity, justice, equality, democracy and peace. As a citizen-centred project of social change, lifelong learning has to invigorate its ties with social

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movements, without which it fails to achieve its full potential. Hunger, poverty and war cannot be constrained without a continual and radical democratisation of the economic, political and social order. The democratisation of the economic order presupposes the conscious action of a majority that refuses to uphold the market as the ultimate regulator of economic, political and social power. Resisting the monopoly of power by the market-state needs a lifelong learning agenda which views human beings as citizens rather than passive consumers in a "free" market.

Lifelong Learning in the Context of Global Capitalism

In his 1993 review of theories of lifelong learning, Kenneth Wain traces two approaches to lifelong learning: one concerned with in-service training and recurrent education, and one which envisions a social transformation leading to democratization and a better quality of life for women and men (Wain, 1993). Many in the field acknowledge the two streams of lifelong learning, philosophy and praxis, and some also point out that the recurrent education stream has gained much more currency in the past decade (Ramdas, 1999).

Writing in 1999, Barry Hake argues the return of 'lifelong learning' to the policy agenda in the late 1990s can be attributed to the condition of 'late modernity,' which is characterized by greater stress on the market and individual choice, with greater opportunity for some and greater risk for others. In terms of educational policy, Hake finds

> a significant trend toward towards the limitation of public responsibility to the provision of 'start qualifications' to enter the labor market, employers' responsibilities in the development of their employees, and the growing emphasis upon the responsibility of individuals for investment in education and training in order to maintain their personal employability (Hake, 1999, pp. 82-83).

In an article on the rhetoric of lifelong learning, Robert Tobias examines the policy changes in post-compulsory education in New Zealand within the economic and political context of the 1980s and 1990s (Tobias, 1999). The new system of lifelong education encourages people to learn specific 'competencies' through mix-and-match, geographically portable learning units, and uses standardized assessment to equate prior learning to the different units. Tobias situates these new policies in a political economic context, citing Gorz's 1989 predictions about the international labour force: 25% will be 'core' workers (who must accept short- and long-term retraining and position mobility); 25% will be 'peripheral' workers (full-time/high-turnover and temporary/part-time administrative workers); and 50% will be 'external' (highly skilled professionals and workers with no particular skill working on contract or subcontract). The demands on this newly segmented working class are that 'the firm's stable core of employees must be functionally flexible; the peripheral workforce, for its part, must be numerically flexible' (Gorz, cited in Tobias, 1999, 111). Tobias identifies an ideology of individualism that pervades the new programs, and argues that lifelong learning is easily co-opted to serve the global capitalist political economy. Noting that it is not a lack of skills or credentials that produce under-employment, instead it is the capitalist system itself, Tobias predicts that '[t]he vast majority are likely to become disillusioned with a search for qualifications within a shrinking global labour-market.' For those of us involved in lifelong or adult education, Tobias concludes that

> we will have to go beyond the task of helping individuals escape or climb the pyramid of opportunity; we must move beyond a welfarist and narrowly skills-based approach to education and training (Tobias, 1999, 117).

As it becomes clearer to adult educators that our programs are equipping individuals to become flexible, peripheral, and expendable workers, we are simultaneously losing the educational structures that allow room for critical education, and we are being engulfed in the ideology of learner as commodity. Within the political economic structuring of, and constraints on lifelong learning described by Tobias and Hake, how are adulteducators seeking to achieve the transformative lifelong learning described by Wain?

Lifelong Learning: A Marxist-Feminist Framework

A Marxist-feminist framework allows us to understand the complex social relations that underpin the lifelong learning debate. We must expose the mechanisms through which labour power is commodified, appropriated, and driven into competition. At the same time, we must observe

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how global, local and family-based divisions of labour along lines of gender, race, ethnicity, region, and political/legal status creates the conditions for super-exploitation (and therefore continued profits) that capitalism requires in order to continue as a system.

In many ways, and for similar reasons, the concept of feminism has become as difficult to untangle as the concept of lifelong learning. It was rather easy to map the Second Wave of feminism. The feminism of the 1960s and 1970s could be conveniently divided into a handful of trends, theoretical positions, varieties, or schools. They included Liberal, Marxist, Socialist, and Radical feminisms. Feminism had also begun to be divided along the lines of ethnic, national, religion, or racial loyalties. There were, for instance, Black and White feminisms, and French, American, Canadian, or British ones. This diversification continued at a much faster pace in the last two decades of the century. Developments in social theory, especially the rise of poststructuralism and postmodernism, have created new blends such as poststructuralist feminism, post-Marxist feminism, post-colonial feminism, and many other "post-" positions. Moreover, feminism has experienced more internationalization. Feminist theory is now created and recreated all over the world, from India to Egypt to Japan to Morocco. The feminist challenge to religion has added to "Christian feminism" varieties such as "Islamic feminism."

Feminism today is fragmented more than ever. In its increasing internationalization, it has been further ethnicized, nationalized, and racialized. Theoretically, it is a period of blending of theoretical positions. Indeed this seems to be a wonderful "marketplace of feminist ideas," which offers commodities of all sorts for all tastes. However, much like the marketplace of commodities, the stunning diversity of feminism is superficial. It is not difficult to see in this diversity an old divide over the question of patriarchy and how to get rid of it. Liberal varieties of feminism fail to see patriarchy as a regime of the exercise of male power; as a system of systems or as a network of networks of power that is tied to economy, religion, law, culture, language, arts, media, education, and state power. Thus, they have historically reduced patriarchy to the realm of law. Legal reform, according to liberal feminism, can create gender equality; even education can do the job. By contrast, Marxist feminism looks at patriarchy as the regime of the exercise of male gender power. Patriarchy cannot be reduced to any single component such as ideas, habits, law, language, discourse, customs, etc. Moreover, patriarchy, as a regime for the exercise of power, creates the conditions of its own reproduction.

Postmodernist approaches to patriarchy are closest to liberal feminism. Many postmodernists share the liberal claim that power is non-hierarchical. Postmodernists share the liberal view that there is no relations of dominance; postmodernists replace dominance by *difference*. Liberalism, much like postmodernism, has always celebrated difference in the name of individualism. The individual is the centre of the universe in liberalism; it is the embodiment of difference. This paper argues that postmodernism is a refined version of the emerging liberalism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, although it has been argued by others that it is the ideology of late capitalism.

Marxist feminism is distinguished from other varieties of feminism by its dialectical approach. Postmodernists emphasize the uniqueness or particularism of patriarchy, women, and feminisms. They fail to see in these particularisms a universal system of oppression and an international(ist) feminist movement. It is not surprising, therefore, that they encourage women to be loyal to their particular ethnic, national, local, tribal, and religious patriarchal orders.
Marxist feminism views feminism as a conscious intervention in the hierarchically organized regime of gender power. Concepts such as dominance, the unequal division of power, oppression, and exploitation are crucial not only in understanding patriarchy but also in overthrowing patriarchal rule. This theoretical/conceptual repertoire distinguishes Marxist feminism from both liberal and postmodernist feminisms.

Analyzing the Field: Rhetoric and Reorganization

In order to understand how the two streams of lifelong learning (recurrent education and democratization) are faring, we must first assess the reorganization that has been occurring in the ways we provide and theorize adult education. In a reflection on the past decade in adult education theory, Ramdas notes that through the 1990s there was a decrease in discussion of feminist and Freirian praxis, and a sharp increase in advancing a rationale for what she calls 'enterprise education.' Worldwide, adult educational structures are shifting to accommodate the market (or, rather, the demands made by the World Bank, IMF, and trade agreements on behalf of finance capital). The reorganization is characterized by portable skill units, distance education, work experience accreditation, and individualization. The learner is conceptualized as a consumer,

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with consumer choices (Edwards, 1996; Field, 1996). As free agents, these learners compete for educational units that seem to have the highest exchange value (Tett, 1996, p. 151). Finally, education becomes a business itself, no longer a state funded enterprise that responds to market needs, but selling a commodity for a profit (Hart, 1996, p. 96).

To exemplify the approach to lifelong learning that calls for democratization, we can look at the way adult educators in the academy, government, the market and civil society have asserted their positions at the major international gatherings of the last decade. Documents such as the Jomtein, Thailand final report (1990), the Delors Report (1996), the UNESCO Hamburg *Declaration for Action* (1997), and the UNESCO *Dakar Framework for Action* (2000) provide a more democratic vision by tying the question of learning and learners to citizenship, participation, justice, gender equality, peace, economic development, civil society, indigenous peoples and minorities. This vision is thrown out, however, into a world that holds less and less space for these ideals. Educational restructuring discourages cooperation between institutions. Privatization removes democratic control of education, and removes the possibility of a pedagogy that shifts power away from institutions (Tett, 1996, p.161).

Increasingly, the role of the state is to pay lip service to human rights, while restructuring to serve market interests (Commission on Social Justice, 1996; Edwards, 1993). While equal, accessible, democratic education is hampered by serious structural constraints, the rhetoric of lifelong learning has become essential for maintaining the appearance of opportunity. The idea that opportunity flows from skill acquisition, masks the fact that there is not a skills gap, but a jobs gap. Some segments of under-classed/reserve army of labour will never be tapped into, and a large number of jobs that *are* available to workers do not draw on the human capacity to think (Hart, 1996, p. 102). The need to be flexible and re-trainable depends on one's location in the political economy- these qualities apply to the oversupply of middle and lower pay-range labour, not to the limited number of highly-paid workers (Edwards, 1993, p. 184).

Rather than achieving prosperity for individual workers, the reorganization of adult education is concurrent with the emergence of a newly segmented working class. Hart suggests that when we talk of lifelong learning for a unified workforce, we are actually talking about a highly stratified group. By differentiating skills along lines of race and gender, workers with a wealth of skills, knowledge and experience are devalued, and the commodity value of white male labour continues to rise (Hart, 1996, p. 99). An ever-cheaper, ever more adaptable workforce is the only way to ensure continued growth of profit in a global capitalist system.

Lifelong Learning and the Struggle for Social Change

The educational legacies of feminism, of worker organization, and of revolutionary struggle are consciousness-raising, and capacity-building. Consciousness-raising is a collective, grounded, group-defined process that is bound up in working toward a better existence for the group- as a group, not as the sum of its competing parts. Learning for social change is rooted in collective debate, community problem-solving, and solidarity. Learning characterized by segmentation, portability, profitability, and individualization is the antitheses of consciousness-raising.

Group consciousness, whether it crystallizes around ideas of class, gender, race, nationality, ability, or sexuality, is always a dynamic, dialectic phenomenon. Under the forces of global capitalism, group consciousness is never a static or passive set of ideas. Consciousness, and therefore learning for change, is not a thing, but a process or movement. Consciousness, then, has a direction, and can be progressive or regressive, and is ever moving toward or away from goals of democracy, justice, and equality (Ollman, 1993). Learning for social change, as a dynamic, dialectic process, does not and cannot occur through individualized, portable learning units. It does not flourish in privatized, market-driven learning institutions in which power and decision-making is moved ever further from the hands of workers and learners.

The strategy of "All Power to the Market" has failed to solve the problems of poverty, disease, hunger, inequality, injustice, war, and ecocide. The miracle of the market has not materialized and if economic theory and three decades of globalization are any guide, the miracle is already a disaster; "information economy" is no better than the traditional production-based economy; "free trade" has not proved to solve the problems of unemployment and uneven development. Paula Allman argues that, '[T]he human condition is not only riddled with injustice and oppressive division, it is illogical' (Allman 2000). She advocates 'authentic social transformation' as a process '...through which people can change not only

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their circumstances but themselves' (Allman 2000, p. 1-2). This entails a lifelong learning process, as Allman would suggest, where human consciousness and the questions such as 'how it is constituted' and 'how it can be rendered more critical' are at its core.

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